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SUBJECT: VICE PRESIDENT FACING STIFF OPPOSITION FROM OWN
PARTY

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REFTELS: (A) PARAMARIBO 219 (B) PARAMARIBO 286

¶1. (U) Summary. Nine months after its formation, the governing New Front Plus coalition is plagued by infighting. The newcomer to the coalition, the all-Maroon A-Combination, often finds itself at odds with its coalition partners (see Ref A) while the ambitious Javanese-based Pertjaja Luhur party is known to flex its muscles much to the chagrin of President Ronald Venetiaan. (See Ref B). The position of the Hindustani-based United Reform Party (VHP) within the coalition has weakened recently with the escalation of long simmering internal party troubles undermining its strength and threatening the party's cohesion. Factions within the VHP are extremely dissatisfied with a lack of internal party democracy and Vice-President and VHP chairman Ramdien Sardjoe's leadership. The disgruntled members went so far as to take VHP leadership to court to force change, but the presiding judge rejected their demands on June 2. The conflict between the older, inflexible guard of the VHP embodied in the 70-year old Sardjoe and the VHP's younger generation demanding reform and transparency is common to parties as a political generational shift is emerging in Suriname. This is the third in a series of cables on the strained coalition in Suriname and will focus on the VHP's preoccupation with its internal party problems. End Summary.

VHP: SURINAME'S OLDEST AND LARGEST HINDUSTANI PARTY

¶2. (U) Established in 1949, the VHP is one of the oldest political parties in Suriname and was one of the founding parties of the governing New Front coalition. The party, symbolized by an elephant, is the largest Hindustani-based party in Suriname and ethnically homogeneous. The party elites are primarily wealthy government officials or successful businessmen while the majority of VHP supporters come from low-income backgrounds, with a large rural contingency particularly in the coastal districts.

¶3. (U) The VHP suffered a severe blow during the 1996 national election when five members of an internal splinter group (BVD) crossed the aisle to help secure an electoral victory for the National Democratic Party (NDP) opposition candidate Jules Wijdenbosch. After sitting in the

opposition for 4 years, the VHP as part of the New Front coalition was once again elected into power in 2000 and 2005. Last year's election proved to be the worst showing ever for the VHP in a democratic election in Suriname. Its share of the overall vote fell by four percent (from 19 to 15 percent). This resulted in the loss of three seats in the 51-seat National Assembly from 10 to 7, the least it has ever held. The party only won one of five available seats in its traditional stronghold of Nickerie, versus three in 2000. The drop in seats translated into a loss of two ministerial positions traditionally in the hands of the VHP as the New Front had to make room for additional coalition partners to obtain a majority.

INTERNAL OPPOSITION FRACTIONS FORM AND DEMAND CHANGE

¶4. (U) While the eight parties of the New Front Plus coalition continue to struggle to keep their coalition together, VHP leaders are struggling to keep their own party together. In December 2005, disgruntled VHP members unhappy with party leadership and the downward trajectory of the VHP formed a pressure group to demand change. The action group, named Renewal, Rejuvenation and Change (VVV), is led by Anand Girjasingh, member of a prominent VHP family, and Prim Raghoebarsingh, who is the brother of the VHP Minister of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries. In April, another opposition group formed with support from several senior officials at various VHP-controlled Ministries and voiced many of the same complaints as the VVV.

¶5. (U) The VVV is pressing for more internal party democracy, stating that the party of some 10,000 card-carrying members is being led by a small group who use the party to further their own interests. They say that rules

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and regulations of the party have never been made public and are unknown to many members. They also complain that party elections are not held regularly, and that important party decisions are still voted on by a show of hands, a practice, the VVV claims, designed to intimidate. The VVV is also very unhappy with Vice-President Sardjoe's management of the party and is demanding that he step down. The VVV was extremely upset when the VHP executive board gave up the party's claim to the Speaker of the National Assembly position to accommodate the Javanese-based Pertjaja Luhur during the formation of the New Front Plus coalition in 2005. The party had occupied this position every other time it had been in power.

¶6. (U) Unhappy with months of fruitless dialogue with VHP leaders, the VVV took a dramatic step on April 13, instituting summary court proceedings against the VHP executive board to press their demands for a change in the timing of internal elections and greater transparency. After weeks of unsuccessful court-ordered talks, presiding Judge John von Niesewand ruled in favor of the VHP executive board on June 2. The VVV is still considering whether to appeal the decision. The judge did not issue an opinion alongside his ruling. Observers note that Von Niesewand was in a difficult spot, as ruling against the VHP executive board would have essentially been ruling against the Vice-President, a politically sensitive move. (Note: That the President and Vice-President also serve as their party chairmen highlights the consolidation of power both enjoy and the conflict of interest inherent in the system. End Note.)

OPPOSITION GEARING FOR HEATED PARTY ELECTIONS

¶7. (U) With the ruling, VHP leaders are now free to

schedule party elections, which will most likely be in mid-July. Sardjoe said that a victory of one partner over another was no victory for the VHP, and that he wants to turn opponents into allies. VVV leaders show no signs of backing down and stated their intention to put forward an alternative list of candidates for the executive board and other party organs. A senior member of the VHP advisory board has already publicly declared his support of the VVV's candidate list and predicted many others would do the same.

¶8. (SBU) A former VHP parliamentarian told the Ambassador that internal VHP opposition to Sardjoe is significant enough that if fair and transparent elections were held, Sardjoe and his fellow board members would lose. For decades, the VHP drew strength from its charismatic and popular leader Jaggernath Lachmon, but since Lachmon's death in 2001, Sardjoe has been unable to fill his shoes, and the VHP has suffered accordingly. Sardjoe is perceived by many to be arrogant and out of touch. One of his initial moves upon becoming Vice-President was to discontinue weekly press briefing performed by his predecessor, breaking off one of the few regular avenues of communication between the government and the electorate.

DISCONTENT NOT ISOLATED TO VHP

¶9. (U) Likely influenced by events within the VHP, there are now whispers of similar actions being planned by groups within President Venetiaan's National Party Suriname (NPS) party. A senior NPS official, however, recently dismissed the portrayal of the level of discontent as exaggerated. President Venetiaan, who turns 70 this month, has been at the helm of his party for years and is currently serving his third non-consecutive presidential term. As in the VHP, some party members complain of a lack of internal democracy and too much power in the hands of party elites.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) The VHP stands to lose its dominant position among the Hindustani population, Suriname's largest ethnic group at 27 percent, unless it changes course to become a more

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modern, transparent political party. By remaining inflexible and resistant to internal debate, the old guard within the party led by Sardjoe may cause a dissident faction to leave as occurred in 1996, dealing a severe blow to its bargaining clout within the governing coalition and its prospects for future electoral support. The need for increased internal party democracy is not isolated to the VHP, but applies to all of Suriname's major parties, in which older politicians tend to cling to power and control at the expense of developing the next generation of leaders. Two bright spots for the VHP's future are Minister of Justice and Police Chandrikapersad Santokhi, who is currently the most proactive and popular Minister and may be eyeing a presidential bid in 2010, and Kermehend Raghoebarsing, the well-regarded Minister of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries and the former Minister of Planning and Development.

BARNES